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ABSTRACT

The Indian student should draw upon the past and also think of the future. He should become familiar with one or two Indian spokesmen who have used their heritage in distinctive ways or who speak for their culture and its preservation. The student should examine his own environment, his classroom, and his associates to see if the direction that might be found in these areas is in his best interest. How can one walk away from home and by so doing eventually return to it? The early Indian educators, it seems, gave two answers to this problem. First, they recognized an early training period and a time when a person somehow had to come to terms with his destiny. So the first answer is that an individual must somehow return as a changed person, a warrior who now has some specific skill that he contributes to the welfare of the community. For the second answer, the myth-makers of the Pacific Northwest suggest that you become a raven and that you begin to travel. This answer is equivalent to creative ethnicity, for it means that if you must leave family and friends, you may still, in essense, take them with you.
(Author/JHZ)

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CULTURAL LITERACY IN THE INDIAN CLASSROOM

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By

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In a national context there is no longer a concern only with content in the English classroom - what will we write about today? - but a serious effort to have content reflect the problems of our society and the kind of society tomorrow's citizens would like to have. The effort to establish a direction for one's endeavors, to have certain future goals, is, of course, commendable. It should be noted, however, that as far as most Indian students are concerned the effort has always been related to an often unrealized or dimly understood cultural problem.

This problem was brought home to me recently by an announcement about a future English convention scheduled to take place somewhere in the South. On the invitational form the planners described certain educational issues in a precise and thought-provoking way. One paragraph, for instance, spoke of the new interest in content and the mastery of basic writing tools:

> Our professional literature and, increasingly, the popular press have turned again to the question of

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> literacy - who has it, what it is, what it is good for - and to the question of whether we are or are not faced with a crisis. The terms of the debate, however, have changed. The question is no longer solely one of whether students are learning basic skills but whether those skills are being used in the service of appropriate social and intellectual ends. The questions raised could be phrased something like this: 'What image of our society or our habits of mind are we giving students in the school tasks they face as readers and writers? And what bearing does that image have on the world we most like to imagine?' (CCCC Annual Convention)

The final question is an important one. The word we applies to all of us, but it has a special meaning for some students, especially for those who find themselves in some way different from the mainstream people who surround them. Perhaps the matter can be expressed by saying that these students begin to see in two directions. They begin to notice ways in which they are similar to everyone else and they begin to notice also how they are different.

If Indian students feel deeply about the differences. they may come to realize in time that, yes, there is a crisis in the Indian classroom and there always has been since the day the first Indian child stepped into a four-square. European-type schoolroom. Naturally a

mellowing process has set in and over the years both sides have learned valuable lessons. Yet, in some instances there is still the problem of adjusting to the special characteristics of students or the difficulty on the part of students in concentrating their energies or their willpower in some certain direction.

If a commitment of some kind is called for, then it will no doubt be based upon some belief system, some body of facts, or on the educators or the beacon lights that at times illuminate a passageway. As teachers, we can be excused for using whatever is available, a word, a picture, or an insight that may come on the spur of the moment. To preserve one's heritage or to make use of the past, we may suggest that an individual would do well to work diligently towards some realistic goal in the future. This statement, of course, is a paradox. How does a young Indian student return home by going away from it? Yet, on this point, I am quite certain, both the Indian teachers of the past and our own educational system would agree. Further, this bit of adivce necessarily includes some understanding of creative ethnicity and tribalism, a knowledge of the contributions of anthropology in one form or another, and certain informed, non-threatening viewpoints about the modern scene.

First, it is clear that we live in an Age of Terminology, as well as Technology, so I will attempt to simplify wherever possible. Creative ethnicity, for instance, means coming to terms with one's tribal or

cultural background, it means knowing the significant aspects of that cultural background, and it means seeing that particular past as a marketable asset - a strike in your favor, in other words, and not simply a lost game or a place where one can go to avoid perplexing problems.

Creative ethnicity has also a more basic meaning, which can be illustrated by one of the widespread Indian myths of our continent. Stith Thompson gives The Bungling Host story the motif number J2425. He points out that the story is found among the Montagnais of the Labrador Peninsula, among the Micmac, the Southern Ute of Colorado, Canadian Dakota, Cherokee, Biloxi, Navaho, Kwakiutl, Wichita, Tsimshian, and in numerous other tribes scattered over the continent. (Thompson, p.301). The gist of the story is as follows: The Trickster visits various animals who display their peculiar powers in obtaining food. He returns the invitation and tries to provide food in similar ways. He fails and usually has a narrow escape from death.

The opening scene in this folktale usually has Black Bear holding his paws over the fire in his dwelling place in order to produce a bowlful of tasty grease for his guest. When Coyote, a day or so later, attempts the same trick, he succeeds only in burning his paws to a crisp and howling in pain. Investigators often point out that Indian folktales do not finish with an appropriate moral comment as do the European tales. Yet, it seems difficult to miss the moral of the story. As one of the animal characters says to

Trickster, "You are very foolish to try to do things that are beyond your powers." It was very likely a cardinal principle with the ancient hunter: he had to live by the slogan that was once engraved above the entrance to the temple at Delphi - Know Thyself.

These words, it is clear, also explain creative ethnicity. They point out the general belief that there is no substitute for a proven skill. Each animal tribe relied on its particular powers. The bear used his paws to obtain food; thinking man, as a different type of creature, was supposed to use his head to figure things out.

Technology, therefore, became increasingly important. In time certain proven techniques won out over such magical displays as the all night ritual ceremony, the bear charms, or the predictions derived from the hypnotic trance or from dreams.

Whisper these words into your hands
Walk softly and do not call out
The Bear is coming, the Bear is coming
Today we must prepare, today he will arrive

This last March, 1986, I had the privilege of listening to the Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday read three or four bear charms that he had composed. The example just given, by the way, is a pale imitation. That spring evening Momaday spoke to a packed auditorium about a certain year that was recorded in the Indian winter counts, about two Kiowa myths of importance to his tribe, and about the Plains Indian

experience in general.

In a sense, Professor Momaday, when he addressed the group, was in the future because it was a moment that he had been preparing for since his younger years. On the other hand, he was also recreating the past, or returning to the past in a significant way. Perhaps I am saying that it is never possible to drift into the future; a student or a teacher has to train for it, has to impose order on what is essentially a chaotic realm, or, in the final analysis, make an attempt to move something from one's past into the ever-approaching present.

John Dewey touches on this point when he writes, "'A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance when it enters into the present, but not otherwise'" (quoted by Fitzgerald, p.174). When the past is divorced from the present, or is seen as a rival of the present. Dewey continues, then "'culture becomes an ornament and solace: a refuge and an asylum.'" The words here, certainly, are not used in a pejorative sense: indeed, as has been pointed out, an important kind of order is involved. The term that partially expresses this regularity and this order from the Indian point of view, at least, is called <u>tribalism.</u>

When the word is mentioned in the literature, it is seen at times as being somehow a stumbling block to progress. Of course, the term is not often used in the literature, so I have some freedom in working out the details. That is, I

tend to approach the concept from an Indian viewpoint, which means that the term could be translated, in a rather broad way, as denomination or church. The tribe, to many of its members, suggests a body of like-believers. Naturally, it may be far from holding common beliefs, just as America may be very diverse beneath the deceptive Fourth of July appearance of things. A person is born into a tribe, just as an individual, through a ritual rebirth, joins a particular church. Membership permits an Indian to speak of a National Brotherhood or another person to speak of brotherly love. Both church and tribe have a certain kind of order, a certain regard for the past; both make an effort to uphold principles, to maintain appearances, to avoid change for the sake of change. Tribalism, in short, suggests that one's allegiance is restricted mainly to certainties, not to uncertainties, that one's identity is fixed, not subject to constant evaluation, and that duty and honor take on meaning in one's homeland, not in some far off land and among strangers. Naturally, language plays a vital role in how these details are finally seen and evaluated.

This comparison between tribe and church should also suggest why nationalism is an extension of a religious attitude and why it may be seen as tribalism writ large. In any case, within this tribal framework there is also, according to the Sioux Holy Man Black Elk, another crossroads to be considered, for he speaks in his metaphorical way of a Good Red Road running north and south

and a more earthly but equally powerful Black Road running east and west. The upright person should make every effort to travel the Good Red Road because it is the road of life, as opposed to the Black Road, which leads only to death. (Neihardt, p.24).

Black Elk's vision, of course, was for his own times. Yet, visionaries often leap the boundaries of their historical period. The Dakota prophet did not explain why the Red Road went north and south: his vision said it did and so it was presented in that manner. Yet, there is a certain inner logic in having it run counter to the daily pathway of the sun, for the beginning and end of life, as we see it unfold each day or each year, is a part of the earth and a part of our existence here below. But tribal life, Black Elk seems to be saying, is essentially a religious life, for red is the color of creation and the new beginning and long life is a blessing of the supernatural powers above.

Yet, even within the tribal context it is possible to fall by the wayside, to turn in the direction of the world, to begin living only for oneself, and in essence to forget who you are. Black Elk, for instance, points out metaphorically that the Red Road means movement, traveling forward, activity, and a concern for the welfare of others. To turn away from the problems of life is to follow the Black Road, and it can only lead to disappearance, separation, and finally death.

These two roads, once again, are merely images from one man's visionary experience. It is not unusual to apply our modern ethical considerations to past concepts, if only in a literary way. There were, after all, thinkers in the past and often their ideas are couched in the sensory language of mythology. On the Pacific Northwest Coast, for instance, the culture hero was Raven, and one of the early and remarkable Raven Cycles belonged to the Tsimshian tribe, a group who came relatively late to the coastal scene (Boas, pp. 58-100).

If these Tsimshian stories are also directed at the human condition, and there are indications that they are, then one notices eventually the same division between spirituality on the one hand and bumbling, aimless, worldly activity on the other. Instead of a black road, this time the observer sees only a completely black bird. So, what color stands for the good side of man's nature?

This division seems always to be of primary concern with early thinkers, or with the myth-makers, because there was an effort to define a human being and to see him as culturally separate or somehow mentally apart from the animal tribes and the world outside the village. There are numerous myths, of course, that show how we are similar to those in the animal world, but, in my opinion, the early shaman were a major influence, especially in the Pacific Northwest, in showing how man was different.

The Raven, for example, is symbolically a bird of two

colors, white and black. In the Tsimshian Raven Cycle the Raven was once a shining youth, entirely white, who became somehow infected with the world, became voracious, and was sent into the world by his father. His travels seem to go metaphorically through the year, or there are certain suggestions that this organizational scheme is at work. His travels seem also to end when the winter ceremonials begin, which, once again, is a time of whiteness, a time of spirituality.

The concept of order, then, that comes from the past is also opposed to or is a part of what I will now call Success, or the changes that come from being in the world or in the future. Success means creative ethnicity; in the classroom it means having the chance to succeed and knowing that you can succeed. Who gives a child this confidence? In the ancient myths, it was the Trickster. Perhaps he was an entertainer and a manager of ideas, but it is his teaching function that now seems finally important. The order, like the unwritten moral in the Bumbling Host stories, is ever present because the Trickster goes from culture to culture making the same mistakes, or offering, in Erik Erikson's terminology, the "negative identity" that children use to compare with the "ideal prototypes" that they hear about or see on every side during their growing years (Erikson, p.303).

In the Haida Raven Cycle the culture hero is continually reborn. In one episode he is growing up as a rather unusual

infant in a celestial village. The sky-people, however, soon complain that one eye from each person has been stolen. A half-stone-being who stays in the room where the raven infant is sleeping then reports that it is the child who is the culprit, for the stone-being sees him leave each night, bring back the eyes, crack them, and laugh while he is eating them (Boas, p.629).

A story-teller of the past, no doubt, would let the listener consider this incident at his leisure and perhaps for several years. The classroom problem, in any case, has been stated: it might be called a successful happening in the world, for Raven is, in fact, "traveling." In a sense, the viewer is seeing the black road, but the story-teller hopes that the listener will also see the more important direction, or come to understand the order that helps to explain the action. The incident suggests, in other words, that the Haida Raven is engaged in creating star-people, or is transforming things, as he has done from the very beginning. A variant of the Star-Husband Myth from the Eskimo region, in addition, carries the idea that the star-people have only one eye and that it is their job to lie on the ground in the sky-world and observe the human world below (Lantis, pp.142-4).

The ability to read an older cultural map, of course, should be attributed in large part to the special insights of the anthropologists. It is possible for an English major to go through college without taking a course in

anthropology, unfortunately. But it is not possible to study the early people of the North American continent in any detail without in some way being exposed to anthropological theory and anthropological writings. My undergraduate work would perhaps be an example. I often thought of culture, and I memorized a precise definition of culture - from the essays of Matthew Arnold. Culture, he said in his lofty Victorian way, is very simple. It is the study of perfection; it is the best that has been thought or written: in other words, the crême-de-la-crême, which meant, naturally, Euripides and Plato, Sophocles and Aristotle, as well as the rest of the Greeks, with, perhaps, the best of the Romans thrown in. For Matthew Arnold and his idea of sweetness and light, the Greek culture was the final boundary of our western world (Arnold, pp. 99 and 113). Beyond the Algean Sea there was nothing, outer darkness, no man's land.

Strange to say, this great educator has taken his place as another trickster figure, teaching us by his example how not to think of culture. That is, people who can communicate in a language of any kind may be said to have a culture. If a human being can knock a coconut out of a tree and tell someone else where the tree is located, then he has a culture. Culture is the total way of life of any group of people. It is the man-made part of the environment (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, pp. 96 and 125). "It consists," says William R. Bascom, "essentially of any form of behavior which is

acquired through learning, and which is patterned in conformity with certain approved norms." (Bascom, p. 284). Such a statement, it is clear, includes all the customs, traditions, and institutions of a people, together with their products and techniques of production.

Certainly, Indian students should receive some of this information as soon as possible. They should understand, first, that they have a culture, secondly, that there is nothing defective or odd about their culture, and finally that the human mind has been working well in every period of human endeavor. The advances that are a part of a highly structured society are, in fact, available to all. The information that Franz Boas and many others have collected and studied over the years is perhaps too extensive for certain levels of education, but it should be pointed out that several important principles of anthropology have already been discussed. Indian myths, for instance, can be seen in terms of similarities and differences. Franz Boas devoted much of his life to a cataloging of the differences. Claude Levi-Strauss, in our own time, has concentrated on the similarities.

Black Elk, when he spoke of the Good Red Road, was, in fact, also pinpointing a similarity because most religions have a <u>one true way</u>, a straight and narrow path that leads to salvation. The differences associated with the actions of the black Raven are also related to, as well as opposed to the <u>one</u>, the area of unchanging order, the whiteness, the

similarity, the universal aspect, or, in more mystical terms, the center around which the opposites revolve. The traditional aspects of education, therefore, have changed by degrees and in their complexity but not in their basic parts. The one and the many, the universal and the local, competence and performance, order and success, the diachronic and the synchronic - both parts must be recognized and understood if any balance in one's information is to be achieved.

The matter, of course, is complicated when a cultural boundary of any kind is involved. Anthropologists speak of ethnocentrism, the engrained tendency to see others through our own culturally tinted lenses, or to judge others of another culture according to our own upbringing (Carvalho-Neto, p.41). No family or tribe or nation is a monolithic structure. The differences are important, and equally important are the similarities.

Consider the following statement:

> A human robot; a worshipper of machines, brain-washed by the movies, advertising, and television, devoid of tradition, of family life, of self-intimacy; a money-maker for whom the dollar is the only universal value; a super-hygenic food washer who cleans vegetables with chlorine, totally depersonalized, conditioned to live in a spiritual vacuum; in short, a science fiction nightmare and a bore (quoted by Lillibridge, p.9).

Such a description should suggest that a few of the ancient

myth-makers are still with us. Such criticisms, too, can only say that America is a very exciting and unusual place if this is, indeed, the dark side of things.

Criticism, in any case, is a part of the game. The unexamined life, Socrates said, is not worth living. The Indian student, at least, should draw upon the past and also think of the future. The student, finally, should become familiar with one or two Indian spokesmen who have either used their heritage in distinctive ways or who speak for their culture and its preservation. The student should examine his own environment, his classroom, his associates, to see if the emphasis or the direction that might be found in these areas is in his or her best interest.

How can one, therefore, walk away from home and by so doing eventually return to it? This paradox was suggested earlier as a departure point for some of the issues that have been covered so far. The early Indian educators, it seems, gave two answers to this problem. First, they recognize an early training period and a time when a person somehow had to come to terms with his destiny. Anthropologists speak of this requirement as the vision quest, but there are also hundreds of myths that describe the departure and the return of the young hero. To be a part of the community a young man first had to leave the village in order, essentially, to find out who he was. Therefore, the first answer is that an individual must somehow return as a changed person, a warrior who now has

some specific skill that he contribute to the welfare of the community.

The second answer, taken from the Pacific Northwest, may be a bit more interesting. The myth-makers suggest that you become a Raven and that you begin to travel. This answer, I would suggest, is equivalent to creative ethnicity, for it means that if you must leave family and friends that you, in essence, take them with you. If the past means order, relationships, spirituality, and love, then make these things a part of your life. On your travels you may meet other Ravens, for, as the story-tellers are fond of pointing out, this bird always manages to survive. He may appear to be a robot and he may wash his vegetables with chlorine, but behind the rough exterior he remembers when times were good and he knows what sharing and goodness are all about.

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